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Tracking the Tassie Tiger

Extinction and Ethics in Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*

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Introduction

JULIA LEIGH'S *The Hunter* is not an easy read. The problem is not so much the prose style as the way it asks difficult questions, and its difficult protagonist. The novel, first published in 1999, is set in Tasmania, in a time that the contemporary reader might readily identify as 'now'. Its main protagonist, also the novel's only focalizer, is an elusive man who calls himself "Martin David, Naturalist,"[1] with whom it is difficult to identify, not least because he is in no way a naturalist: "Martin David, Naturalist" is in fact *the* hunter of the novel's title. It is, however, through this awkward character that the novel is able to ask difficult questions about extinction and related ethical issues: For M, as "Martin David, Naturalist" is usually referred to,[2] is hunting the Tasmanian (or Tassie) tiger. The intriguing aspect that makes such questions possible is that the last known specimen of *Thylacinus cynocephalus* died in captivity in 1936. Further, the animal functions as a symbol for a number of things, mostly linked with Tasmanian culture: in my analysis of *The Hunter*, I will read the thylacine (another name for this indigenous animal) as a symbol for a colonial past and for changing beliefs in nature.

[1] For example, he is referred to like this twice on page 5. See Julia Leigh, *The Hunter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999).

[2] Making a connection to the James Bond character of the same name would only reinforce the mystery and complex position within a nameless corporation that Leigh's M has.

The *Thylacinus cynocephalus* and the Tasmanian tiger

Given widespread documentation in the form of Aboriginal cave-rock paintings, it may well be assumed that the thylacine's habitat once spread over the entire Australian continent, including its most recent domain in Tasmania. There are, for example, Aboriginal paintings of the thylacine in the Northern Territory and in Western Australia, some two to three thousand kilometres away from Tasmania, the island off the southeast end of the continent. Recent history, however, saw the thylacine's habitat restricted to Tasmania. As far as European documentation is concerned, the thylacine first appears when Abel Tasman recorded the presence of footprints in 1642 which may have been left by the thylacine. In 1804, after European settlement had begun on the island of Tasmania, some escaped convicts reported that they had seen a 'large tyger' in the bush. Following this (misinformed) designation, the thylacine received its more popular name, the Tasmanian tiger. This name also gave the animal its defamatory association with the large carnivorous cat that roams Asia, even though the *Panthera tigris* was some five to ten times heavier.

The use of a number of names to refer to one species reveals, yet also confounds, the issues at hand. The issues central to my argument are culture and environmental sensibilities. Accordingly, I will adopt two terms – tiger and thylacine – in my essay, as the distinction will prove important to my thesis and, moreover, reflects a trend within the novel to do the same. The term 'tiger' is used to refer to the more mythic or cultural manifestations of the animal, whereas I use the more scientific name 'thylacine' to refer to the actual animal in order to address environmental issues.

As David Owen points out, "Spiders and snakes induce a primal fear – and from that day in 1804 […], the island's people had been taught to fear and loathe a dangerous animal."[3] This association, and the strangeness of the thylacine – initially scientifically named *Didelphis cynocephalus* ('dog-headed opossum'), a possum, of all things – made it 'fair game'. Over time, the thylacine came to be associated with ruthless killings of domesticated animals – first and foremost sheep – but it was also accused of attacking small children and of preying on delicate young ladies.[4] Several private enterprises estab-

[3] David Owen, *Tasmanian Tiger: The Tragic Tale of How the World Lost its Most Mysterious Predator* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004): 116.

[4] The former claim proved to be the more pressing, although the suggestion has been made that the disappearances of sheep was probably just as much, if not more, due to introduced species: namely, feral dogs, convicts, and bushrangers. See David Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions* (New York: Scribner, 1996): 283, and Robert Paddle, *The Last Tasmanian Tiger: The History and Extinction of the Thylacine* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002): 103.

lished rewards for the capture of thylacine specimens as early as 1830, and a government bounty was introduced in 1888 and continued until 1909, by which time some 2,200 payments had been made. This bounty was not installed on the basis of statistical evidence supporting the claims of the thylacine's behaviour. Word of mouth, coupled with the power of a number of large land-holders desperate for something on which to blame their lack of agricultural success, instead exerted sufficient pressure on the Tasmanian government of the day to introduce the bounty. In effect, one could claim that the thylacine suffered for being the Tasmanian tiger. The withdrawal of the bounty did not mean the end of the pursuit of the thylacine, however, because by then it had become a much sought-after zoo specimen. The story of the thylacine ends as follows: the last known and confirmed member of the species died in captivity in Hobart Zoo on 7 September 1936, exactly fifty-nine days after the species had been declared protected.[5]

While this was allegedly the end of the thylacine, it was not the end of the Tasmanian tiger. The tiger has lived on as the mascot for the Tasmanian state cricket team as well as for the tourist commission; it is present on bottles of locally brewed beer (Cascade brewery) and adorns the Tasmanian State coat of arms. Furthermore, it can be bought in varying souvenir forms throughout Australia. On another level, a research group was established in 1999 with the goal of cloning the tiger from remnant DNA in museum specimens, although this project has apparently been abandoned in the meantime. It is important to note that it is the thylacine, and not any other of the numerous species in danger of extinction, that has become the focus of scientific activity. It seems as though the tiger refuses to die out, or, more pointedly, as if people do not want the tiger dead. And this is the point where Leigh's story really sets in. Consistent with a scepticism regarding anything and everything official common to Australians (but not just), part of the public refuses to believe that the Tasmanian tiger might be extinct, and this has resulted in regular claims of sightings.[6] Even National Parks and Wildlife Service workers – who also appear in the novel – have reported sightings: David Quammen, for example,

[5] Although I have focused on the role that bounties had to play in the extinction of the thylacine –which reflects, of course, the theme of *The Hunter* – it is important to keep in mind the fact that habitat destruction and the introduction of competitor species (dogs), also factors which are the result of European colonization, may have contributed to the thylacine's decline and extinction. Eric Guiler and Robert Paddle both suggest that an epidemic disease may also need to be factored in (see Guiler, "Profile – Thylacine," and Paddle, *The Last Tasmanian Tiger*, 164).

[6] Quammen cites over three hundred for the sixty year period from 1936 to 1996 (see Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo*, 296).

sees no reason to question a 1982 sighting,[7] and the internet is full of photos and reported sightings from sources of varying degrees of credibility.[8]

It is a more credible sighting that forms the basis for the plot of *The Hunter*: The protagonist M has been sent to Tasmania to retrieve the genetic information of the tiger for an unnamed biotech company. M's base on his trips into the wilderness is a house on the edge of the forest, where the Armstrong family, once struck by disaster, continues to live. The father, Jarrah, was an ecologist looking for the tiger, when he disappeared on the escarpment. Not only does his disappearance serve to underline the dangers of the bush, his profession also places Jarrah in a diametrically opposed position to that of M, the hunter. Jarrah left behind a wife, Lucy, whose consumption of sleeping tablets has transformed her into a Sleeping Beauty of sorts, and two children, calling themselves Sass and Bike, who have taken over the house. Although M only needs a base to fill up on supplies, he begins to develop an emotional attachment to the remaining members of the family, until they are struck by disaster again; this time Sass is badly burnt in a fire, and Lucy is then committed to a psychiatric clinic in Sydney. Nevertheless, M is systematic in playing down any emotions, and is more aptly characterized as a lone hunter than as anything else.

This emotional aspect must be seen in opposition to the motivation behind M's hunt. The suggestion is made that the genetic information could be used for biological warfare,[9] placing the company and, by default, M's mission in a more than dubious light. Of course, the fact that M is hunting the tiger to kill it already puts him 'offside' the general public's sympathies. Hunting an endangered animal does not resonate well with current 'green' thought or political correctness.[10] I will examine the repercussions of this further on. But what is important to note at this stage is that the tiger is not endangered; it is extinct. While we might choose to protect endangered animals, what might we feasibly do about extinct ones? The paradox of the situation pus the moral considerations in a slightly different light: can we be critical of someone who wants to kill something that does not even exist? As Leigh herself points out in an article published in the *Guardian*,

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[7] Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo*, 296–97.

[8] For reports on sightings, see the aptly named www.tasmanian-tiger.com, or, for a conglomerate of sightings of all creatures mysterious and crazy, see www.cryptozoology.com/sightings/sightings.php (including the yeti / bigfoot / sasquatch and the Loch Ness monster).

[9] See Julia Leigh, *The Hunter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999): 50.

[10] The current furore regarding Japanese whale-hunting may serve as an example of this.

> One sure thing is that the ecological goal of maintaining and encouraging biodiversity would be better served by more funds and attention going towards saving animals currently in danger of becoming extinct and, in a broader sense, to preserving the environments in which all animals live.[11]

Before I move on to the ethical question of what we should be spending money on, I want to look at a question the text asks only implicitly: Is extinction always wrong?

The sound of one hand clapping, or, exterminating the extinct

The implied answer to this question is, I think, clear. Of course extinction is wrong, since it means the death of an entire species, which turns out to be both final and fatal. However, the novel offers a different perspective: a group of hippies has stopped over at the Armstrong house for a while. In an uncharacteristically social moment, M joins the group sitting around a campfire in the back garden. The conversation turns from comments on the joint being passed around to Jarrah's book, *Bioethics for Another Millennium*. One of the guys is obviously grappling with the implications of the book. He remarks:

> "Everything is about energy … it's all about transformation of energy, I mean, everything is transformed. Jarrah Armstrong had it right: energy and matter, that's what it's all about. No beginnings and no ends.…" (106–107)

Another member of the group objects, stating that bodies have ends, but the first guy vaguely responds: "Dust to dust, my fine friend, and dust is earth and earth is beautiful, and the rest, the real thing, that goes on too" (107). M, instead of commenting, simply contemplates the repercussions of what has been said: "If everything is transformed then what is extinction?" (107).[12]

If we follow this line of thought: i.e. that nothing exists but atoms, then there is no such thing as extinction. Extinction then becomes a matter of cultural construction: the death of a species also depends on the definition of a species, which is a concern of biological, but also cultural, delimitation. If we

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[11] Julia Leigh, "Back From The Dead," *The Guardian* (30 May 2002): n.p.

[12] There are other ways of asking this question, focussing instead on human responsibility and the nature/culture divide: As Peter Hay points out, "Anyone who has wished to defend the environment interest will have come across the clever-dick riposte, 'if people are part of nature, then everything they do is natural, and so human-induced species extinction is 'natural', and so are chemical weapons, and so was Chernobyl, and so was Bhopal, and so was the Exxon Valdez oils spill'"; Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2002): 23.

choose to think beyond individuals and to think, rather, in 'flows', then the idea of extinction does become a little superfluous. In fact, one could extend this argument to state that a belief in extinction rests on essentialist assumptions. Richard Grove – in *Green Imperialism* – points out that the chief exponent of evolution himself, Charles Darwin, was not necessarily concerned with events of extinction: Grove writes:

> Apart from recognising the uniqueness of the St Helena flora, Darwin was himself remarkably unconcerned, or seemingly so, to advocate the prevention of extinctions or the preservation of forests.[13]

I would argue that the novel, by including M's question "If everything is transformed then what is extinction?," challenges us to ask such questions, asking us to revise the way we see the world and the culture/nature split.

The way we see the world also has a lot to do with how we use it and protect it. Julia Leigh's article in the *Guardian* asked whether we should invest money in habitat protection rather than in protracted cloning projects. This would surely make sense, but this is not how things work. Instead, we protect cute or symbolic animals, often mammals, because our environmental sensitivities are often directed by our empathies. This is hardly ethical – there is no real way to argue that whales and polar bears are intrinsically more valuable than bugs or reptiles – but these are the issues which motivate the masses.

Environmental issues and the nature/culture divide

As Richard Kerridge has pointed,

> Because the environmentalist viewpoint is so crushingly absent from th[e] narrative perspective [of *The Hunter*], environmentalism has a paradoxical, implied emphasis, powerful as a ghostly presence but entirely thwarted and unspoken.[14]

However, I would argue that the environmentalist viewpoint is present in the novel to a certain extent, but in ways that might not be picked up by non-local readers.[15] There are, for instance, references to the Tarkine, a region in the

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[13] Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995): 484.

[14] Richard Kerridge, "Narratives of Resignation: Environmentalism in Recent Fiction," in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. John Parham (Aldershot & Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2002): 97.

[15] It is, however, as Kerridge asserts, certainly absent from M's voice.

northwest of Tasmania, an area associated with 'green protest' and so named by 'conservationists' after the Aboriginal tribe that once lived there. While M is sitting with the group around a campfire, "There is mention of an action out Tarkine way, where the Road to Nowhere is being put through. Yeah, someone knows someone out there, yeah, that's right" (106). The "Road to Nowhere" is also mentioned at the beginning of the novel when M sticks a corner of a poster back onto the wall of the Armstrong's house (10). The characters of the novel, apart from M, are very obviously and stereotypically set up along lines that are common to (former) logging regions. In the *Australian Book Review*, Andrew Peek, for example, criticizes this aspect of "*The Hunter*'s setting, in rural Tasmania, [as pitting] hippie and conservationist against backwoodsy yokels."[16] However angry this construction might make Peek, its simplicity serves to highlight the differences between the two groups residing in the area. A clear-cut distinction like this facilitates sympathies in a way not unlike to the 'you are either with us or against us' political rhetoric. Certainly, clear-cut distinctions such as this are rather superficial and Peek's criticism warranted, but we must recall that we are only privy to M's construction of the world, and M is an outsider. He is not a local resident and lives with the Armstrong family, which is enough to ostracize him from the farmers and loggers (or Peek's 'backwoodsy yokels'). But the environmentalist sentiments present in the Armstrong family and visitors to the house clash with his profession as a hunter. M is an outsider in this world, too. Most readers of *The Hunter* will probably side with the conservationists; thus Kerridge's "ghostly presence" of environmentalism is, I argue, the reader.

There are, thus, a number of tensions operative in the novel. We have, as illustrated above, the tension between the two local groups which is, whilst important for spatial politics, not one of the central themes of the novel. We also have the tension between the Tasmanian tiger and the thylacine – nowhere more explicit than in the question of whether killing something which is already extinct can be a bad thing. Another significant tension which occurs in the text and further questions the nature/culture dualism, is that between the hunter and the hunted, between M and his tiger/thylacine. The following passage may illustrate this point:

> Lying there on the hard ground inside his tent he performs his favourite trick: he changes shape, swallows the beast. The eyes in his head are no longer his own, short thick fur runs along the back of his neck, and his spine grows thick and strong, right out of his back, out into a long stiff tail. He

[16] Andrew Peek, "The Last Thylacine," *Australian Book Review* (June 1999): 30.

> hangs his body off this strong spine, hollows out his belly, shrinks his gangly limbs. His arm is bent at the elbow, and a paw, not a hand, rests against his bony convex chest. (91)

Throughout the novel, M employs a relaxation technique resembling autogenic training to steady himself, often concentrating on his breathing to calm himself down. The esoteric overtones of this passage, which would otherwise clash with M's characterization as a 'cold-blooded' hunter, are thus foreshadowed to a certain extent. He also frames himself variously as a 'Naturalist' to other characters, and is, to himself, a 'natural man'. This kind of natural man is one who can survive in the wilderness 'on his wits alone'. Greg Garrard recognizes the power of the passage above by claiming that it shows a kind of shamanistic transformation.[17] Another way of reading the passage, however, sees it challenging the nature/culture binary: in order to appear as a more than natural man, M is a supernatural man; he comes as close as he can to the tiger. Interpreting his breathing technique as a mental focusing on the physical nature of being, rather than as a mind-over-matter affair, would support such a reading. As shown in the passage quoted above, however, M moves beyond these meanings of the natural as opposed to the cultural in order to merge with an animalistic nature by imagining himself a tiger. This excerpt can therefore be read as a literary strategy for overcoming this split, of re-creating a sense of continuity, or as Val Plumwood puts it:

> If early rationalism construes the genuine human self, in polarised and oppositional terms, as without the qualities of the animal and natural spheres, later mechanism construes nature as bereft of qualities appropriated to the human. The development of human/nature dualism thus destroys bridging characteristics from both ends, as it were, and writes out continuity.[18]

The passage in Leigh's novel thus imaginatively re-creates such bridging characteristics and pushes towards continuity.

What makes it hard for us as readers is the contrast between this 'shamanistic' passage in which M becomes close to the thylacine and, by extension, nature and the fact that, at the close of the novel, M is still able to kill what he must assume is the last living member of the species. I will examine the intricacies of reader sympathies and reader expectations below. The key to understanding this aspect of *The Hunter* lies in the fact that M tries to become (or even becomes) a 'natural man' but, simultaneously, sets out to kill the last

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[17] See Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004): 157.

[18] Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993): 104.

tiger for capitalist gain. He has a specific role placed upon him, yet it is important to stress that he has accepted this task and expects to be paid for it, so he cannot be exempted from all agency.

Having thus contemplated the issues raised by the novel, in conjunction with some research concerning the history of the thylacine, we can see how an ethical dilemma emerges with repercussions for the real world: In the end, would it not have been better to spend money on the protection of other species than on searching for the thylacine? What is the point in pumping millions of dollars into the Australian Museum's project to clone the thylacine using deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) from preserved specimens? I maintain that one of the central factors behind the attempts at bringing back the thylacine is related to an argument I made above in connection with the extinction of the animal. There, I argued that the thylacine died because it was the Tasmanian tiger, that it suffered for the fact of its name's endowing it with a reputation extending beyond its deeds; or, in other words, for its mythic or cultural aura. The same argument might be made in connection with the proposed project of 'reinventing' the animal. In the focus of scientific attention, the thylacine was to benefit from being the Tasmanian tiger, or, put differently, the animal benefits from the symbolic and mythic status associated with it, meaning that it received more attention than many other species. Should such projects succeed, the thylacine would thus be 'reinvented' by the same logic that 'deinvented' it.

Postcolonial nature?

By spending money on finding or 're-creating' the thylacine, the aim is to bring the animal back from the dead. The motivation behind such attempts is, I would argue, a desire to remedy a past gone wrong. In a postcolonial context, one could read such behaviour as band-aiding the past at the cost of preventing the need for cures in the future, a sentiment also articulated in Leigh's contribution in the *Guardian*. Although this development may have played a role in the author's motivation, it is not the message I read in it. The postcolonial implications of my reading of the novel are a little more complex, and require a short detour via other colonial behaviours that were prevalent in the colony of Van Diemen's Land, particularly those pertaining to the treatment of the indigenous population. Indeed, the link between the thylacine and the Tasmanian Aborigine is also made by the novel:

> One day his [M's] attention is caught by a ring of blackened stones and he imagines they might have been laid by the local Aboriginal people, in the years before they, the full-bloods, were almost driven to extinction. He remembers reading that the government had once tried to make another island, De Witt, an Aboriginal sanctuary – anything to redress their embarrassing demise. It was a tiny and forbidding rock of a place, shunned by all. And, naturally, the experiment failed. Then in 1936, the year the last thylacine died in captivity at Mrs Mary Roberts's private Beaumaris Zoo, it was again suggested that De Witt Island could be put to use – any tigers to be rounded up and sent away… (57)

Like the Tasmanian tiger, the Tasmanian Aborigine is a mythic being. Thus, both species are widely considered to be extinct. Like the last Tasmanian tiger – 'Benjamin' in Hobart Zoo, celebrated on film where 'he' is captured forever[19] – the purportedly last known surviving Tasmanian Aborigine, a woman known as Truganini,[20] was also put on public display. As the 'last of their kind', they both symbolize a colonial past, the latter one hundred years more distant than the other. As David Quammen points out with respect to the latter, Truganini's remains

> were taken to mean something. They were taken to mean: *We the British-descended occupants and current possessors of Tasmania have a culpable past, as do many proud peoples. We have exterminated the race who lived here before us. This creature, Truganini, was the last of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Now they're extinct. A terrible thing, sigh, but it's done*. Her skeleton was precious because it embodied this convenient lie.[21]

I believe the thylacine functions in a similar manner. As long as the thylacine is dead: i.e. as long as the thylacine remains the Tasmanian tiger, it is an acceptable part of Tasmanian (and, by extension, Australian, postcolonial)

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[19] See Paddle, *The Last Tasmanian Tiger*, 197–201. I have inserted the name and male pronoun in inverted commas, as Paddle suggests that this specimen was actually female (see 198–99). Paddle's book is characterized by an analytical distance to the records he examines and is infused with critical interpretations thereof: With respect to 'Benjamin', he notes: "I am forced to suggest that it is simply the maleness of the animal that is important. The 'noble' masculine tradition of bravely pursuing a lost cause and following it to its logical end: the last, lone, male survivor on an isolated outpost, losing the battle of life and dying hopelessly but grandly as the last representative of its species" (Paddle, *The Last Tasmanian Tiger*, 201).

[20] The well-known Australian band Midnight Oil has a song called "Truganini" – which touches on issues such as the monarchy, the working class and 'the broken country' – just as an example asserting the extent of Truganini's fame/mythic symbolism.

[21] Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo*, 373. Emphasis in original.

mythology. In this form, it serves as a symbol of a 'terrible' past, establishing a necessary distance from the narrative of the Tasmanian (Australian, post-colonial). Furthermore, the animal must remain extinct for this distinction to be upheld. In this respect, I fully agree with Tony Hughes D'Aeth, who asserts that in "the final phase of the 'hunt' there is little moral distinction between M who seeks to kill the tiger and harvest its genetic information and the Wildlife service which seeks to preserve the tiger as a cherished emblem of the false hope that species loss is not final."[22]

Problems of ethics and sympathies

Hughes D'Aeth's general argument centres on deep ecological considerations, an aspect which, I believe, is important to the novel, as expressed in the fusion of the nature/culture dualism in M's imaginative or shamanistic transformation into the tiger. However, I think that the gist of this particular argument – that while M acts unethically, the Wildlife service cannot be seen as entirely ethically sound, either – can be applied to (post)colonial concerns to even more effect. The two men from the Wildlife service M sees on his last venture onto the plateau are obviously of the same kind as the hippies from the Armstrong base. He overhears them claiming that they will set the animal free, that they'd "hold it by the muzzle and point its nose dead west and tell the poor thing to run like the wind" (155), although they quickly add that taking a photo surely would not do any harm (here the concern is not so much the animal as their own pockets). On the surface level, it seems as though this line of approach – letting the thylacine go – is laudable: this way, the animal would be free to roam the landscape, and be free from being enclosed in a zoo and exposed to tests, diseases, and, possibly, a lonesome death. On a deeper level, I would claim, this behaviour only serves to defer responsibility, indefinitely. In this respect, neither party can claim the moral or ethical high ground.

But this is not the only point the novel makes: Another central issue is the question of why M kills the thylacine, how he is capable of doing this – to be more specific: why we have a problem with him killing the animal, as the protagonist remains, after all, a hunter. Greg Garrard suggests: "One of Leigh's major achievements is to associate believably the rhetoric of closeness to nature with such a morally bankrupt individual"[23] – and it is the strength of the phrase "morally bankrupt" that strikes me as most telling. The tension here is

[22] Tony Hughes D'Aeth, "Australian Writing, Deep Ecology and Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*," *Journal of the Association for Studies in Australian Literature* 1 (2002): 28.

[23] Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 157.

between the reader's perspective, the reader's expectations, and the events of the novel. The narrative structure of the novel is such that the story is told entirely through M's perspective. Richard Kerridge argues that "the narrative viewpoint is so alien that we have little sense of mutual perception with it"[24]; however, I would argue that the opposite is the case, on the grounds that we, as readers, have no way of accessing the text except through M's perspective. Thanks to the construction of the text, we must identify with M, and such identification often generates sympathy: That we then nevertheless feel alienated is the result of a different function of the text: namely, the plot. While certain passages, such as the shamanistic passage above and a number of flashbacks to M's attention-deprived childhood, reveal a sensitive side of M, the fact that he is able to kill his tiger – now thylacine – toward the end of the novel demonstrates that he is a rational being whose emotional drives remain secondary to any romantic notions. But he is not (supposed to be) a man with whom it is easy to identify. We learn, for instance, that M is a loner and a bit of a misanthropist when he catches himself wondering what his guide Jack might be thinking about. M comes to the conclusion that "plodding and savvy old Jack may not be thinking at all. As for M, he who is anchored by neither wife nor home, nor by lover nor even a single friend, his mind takes flight, wanders" (15). These characteristics do not make him appealing as an identificatory figure, but it is conceivable that they are important personality-traits for his profession as a surreptitious hunter.

This aspect is so important in reading the novel because this is the reason why some, like Kerridge, have had a hard time reading it: they expect ethical, reasonable behaviour, commensurable with what we imagine we ourselves have. We, identifying with M, do not want M to kill the thylacine, his precious tiger, because we do not want to imagine that we ourselves could do such a thing. Kerridge offers the following, plot-based, explanation for this sentiment:

> We are made to feel that a relatively slight tilt of the scale, at some point, a slight difference in M's chemical, emotional, or intellectual balance, might have been all that was required for a different outcome.[25]

He is obviously referring to the passages when M shows some sense of closeness to the Armstrong family – when he goes out of his way to make them feel happy, even though we do not feel that this is a man who goes out of his

[24] Kerridge, "Narratives of Resignation," 98.
[25] "Narratives of Resignation," 99.

way to make anyone feel happy. The second wave of disaster having struck this family, M somehow seems to parcel off his emotions:

> Mention of the Armstrongs is now as foreign to M as mention of another planet; he knows it exists, that it has subtle but powerful effects, that it is very far away. (169)

This is after M has killed the thylacine and extracted blood, hairs, and her reproductive organs. But, in an extraordinary juxtaposition, once more playing with the reader's sympathies, the following sentence appears directly after the above passage: "Only Bike is real to him, Bike [Armstrong] – the boy who counts" (169). A number of critics and reviewers have stressed M's masculinity, perhaps in an attempt to come to terms with these conflicting aspects of M's personality and readerly sympathies (or lack thereof): Richard Kerridge, for example, juxtaposes M's "defensive masculinity" with Jarrah's, claiming that the latter represents an alternative, "the lost possibility of a different sort of masculinity to M's. Had Jarrah found the tiger, it is likely that it would have been protected."[26] Andrew Peek underscores M's "chauvinistic attitudes to women" and describes him as "lonely, inarticulate, vulnerable, misogynistic, hard-boiled, out of touch with his feelings, […] a character assembled out of masculine stereotype."[27] Rob Nixon has M "as an old-style frontiersman with a high-tech twist […], he patrols the Tasmanian backwoods with cold-eyed masculine intent."[28] But the problem remains, regardless of whether we subsume it under the category of 'problematic masculinities': Following M through the story, the reader wavers between feelings of sympathy and disgust for this character. As an outsider who points back at society to show us our own shortcomings, M functions as a type of cultural abject – continually demonstrating, demarcating, de- and re-instigating our beliefs via our sympathies.[29]

Nature, postcolonialism, and green sensibilities

The real villain, the bio-technology company, remains obscure throughout the narrative. It is never named, only mentioned two or three times, and only ap-

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[26] Both Kerridge, "Narratives of Resignation," 98.

[27] Andrew Peek, "The Last Thylacine," *Australian Book Review* (June 1999): 31.

[28] Rob Nixon, "Burning Bright," *New York Times* (17 December 2000): n.p.

[29] The novel is presently being made into a film. It will be interesting to see what will become of the narrative perspective in this different medium, and whether the audience's sympathies are played on in a similar manner, or if the film simply installs distance between M and its audience. See Porchlight Films, http://www.porchlightfilms.com.au/thehunter.html

pears in the action of the story via M's recollections of a 'middle man'. This way, the 'bad guys' are absent from the novel, and we are left with 'M', who is arguably simply an agent. The 'bad guys', the ones behind the impetus, are absent, overseas, and talking in from the off (a nameless company that has the power to draw M away from Tasmania and his task via a telephone call). The agents, the ones who are doing the deeds, are present, but are 'only' acting on orders (M is called off, and must obey). By reading the novel this way, we can see *The Hunter* materializing as a colonialist text: nature appears solely as a means to an end. It is a resource.[30] The reader with 'green' sensibilities is left alienated: drawn into the novel through the perspective of this man – and this man only – we either must question our identification with 'M' and the story, or we must start to think more deeply about our green ethic and assumptions. And green sentiments are not as straightforward as they might appear. National Parks, for instance, may be grounded for the most conservative reasons: i.e. protecting God's creation, with little regard for socio-economic factors of other classes or races. Programmes set up for the protection of one particular species may be detrimental to any number of other species.[31] The valorization of 'pure' nature in the form of large tracts of wilderness over 'impure' natures as present in cities or rural areas, for example, is often more reflective of cultural values than any 'hard' scientific facts. Conversely, it is often easier to motivate the masses with images of wilderness and cute animals than rubbish heaps and bugs: These issues are all part of what makes that 'green' sensibility, and the story around the fate of the thylacine in *The Hunter* raises several of them. And, as I found, as soon as we start to think about the thylacine's story, we also have to think about Tasmania's – and, by extension, colonialism's – story.

[30] A related question, which is not addressed in the novel, would ask whose resource the biological data is, that is, who might claim a copyright on it. One could argue that the DNA of a (not quite) extinct species belongs to the (not quite) extinct people of Tasmania: Ines Doujak's work *Siegesgärten* at the recent (2007) Documenta in Kassel is an example of an art work which very explicitly deals with such issues which she refers to as biopiracy (Documenta and Museum Fredericianum, *Documenta 12. 2007* (Cologne: Taschen, 2007): 236–37).

[31] This is a topic dealt with in depth by Tim Low (*The New Nature: Winners and Losers in Wild Australia* (Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin, 2003): esp. 155–77: Here he examines the destructive behaviour of kangaroos and koalas when placed in sanctuaries, a particularly explosive topic, given the iconic status of both animals in Australia.

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